

A Producer Who Courts Uncertainty

By JASON WEISS

THE PHOTOGRAPHS ON Kip Hanrahan's album covers show him swallowed in shadow, at the edge of light, refusing an easy clarity. In concert, he appears no less a mystery — prowling around behind the band, leaning in to tell a soloist what is going to happen next.

Now he seems more restless than ever, totally consumed after months of sessions in the studio on his biggest adventure yet, an extended labyrinth of songs based on "The Arabian Nights." The work just keeps growing, he doesn't know where it will end, and not until he brings in all seven vocalists — Ruben Blades, Jack Bruce and Carmen Lundy, among them — can he finish the writing.

For 15 years as a composer and producer, Mr. Hanrahan has somehow kept fame at arm's length, yet many are the top musicians who admire his work. Long before pop stars were dabbling in world music, Mr. Hanrahan was making connections across genres that did not at the time seem obvious. Next Sunday, he will appear at Sounds of Brazil in Manhattan with a band made up of some of his frequent collaborators, including Don Pullen, Mr. Bruce and Charles Neville.

There is nothing quite like Mr.

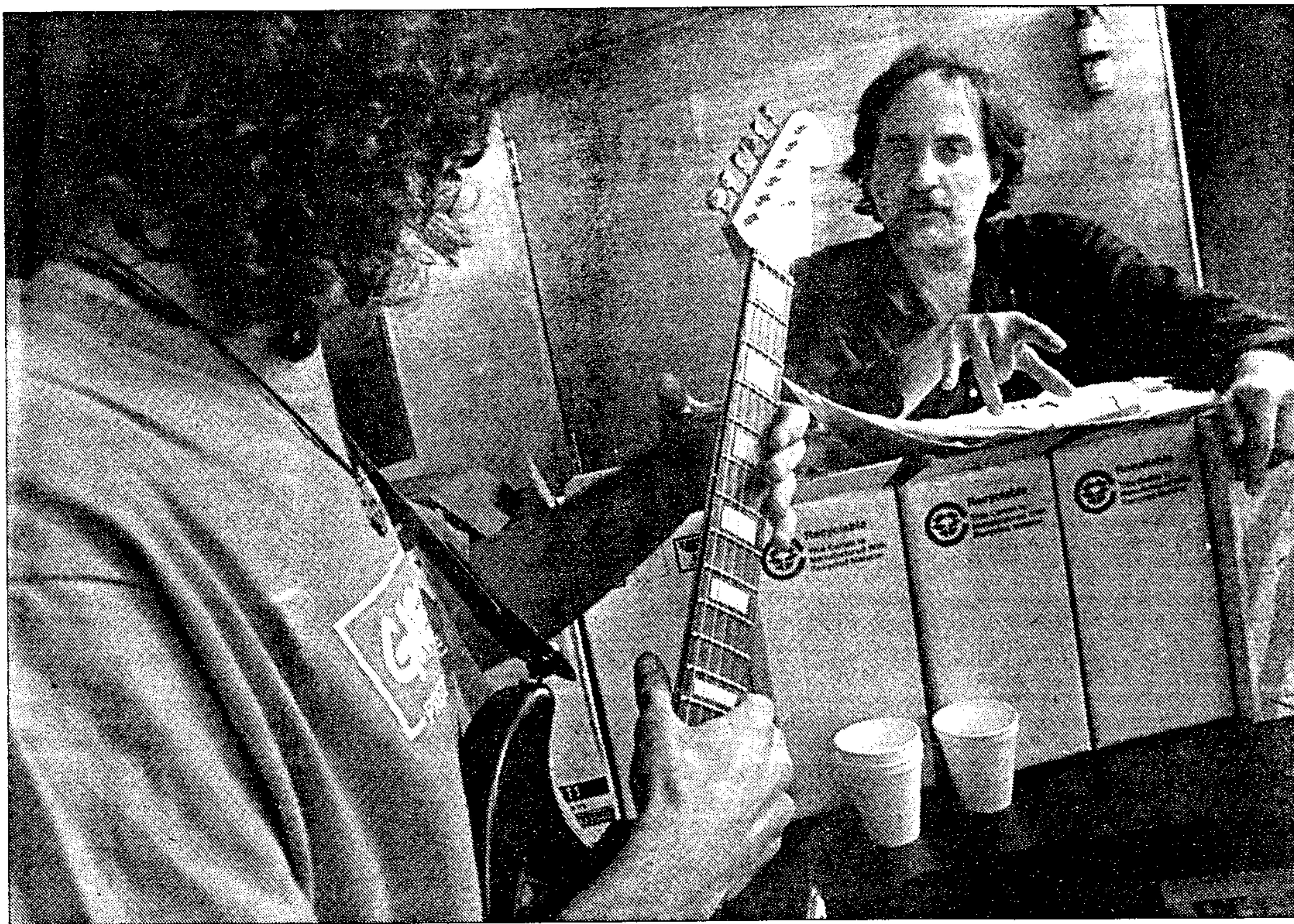
Hanrahan's music — a steamy blend of rhythmic and melodic tensions, drawn from musicians of different traditions (Latin, jazz, rock), yet with something very much his own. The songs flow and intersect like a series of dances or scenes from a movie, fraught with surprises and intimacy.

The current project, "A Thousand Nights and a Night," represents a departure, however; for once, his music is not directly personal, so the interior monologues of earlier songs give way to other forms. "I lose myself into something as far away from me as possible," he said over lunch recently at a Greenwich Village restaurant. But with the instinct for paradox that marks his conversation, he added, "And still you see yourself in the magic of it."

The circumstances of his life have changed as well. A New Yorker to the bone, he is about to turn 40 and for the past year has been living a sort of exile: in suburban Reston, Va., after his wife, Nancy, accepted a teaching job at George Mason University as a specialist in the sociology of music. "I feel more like an expatriate there than in Paris," he said. Nonetheless, he is beginning to enjoy a renewed visibility: Rounder Records has been reissuing nearly the entire catalogue of American Clavé, the label Mr. Hanrahan founded in 1979 to produce his own and other people's music, much of it long unavailable in the United States.

"I'm selling myself into bankruptcy basically to make this record," he

Jason Weiss has written about jazz for more than a decade.



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Kip Hanrahan, right, with Eric Schenkman—For 15 years, Mr. Hanrahan has somehow kept fame at arm's length.

said of the new project. Still, he has been there before. As his wife often reminds him, the records he likes best — "Desire Develops an Edge" (1983), featuring Mr. Bruce as vocalist, and "Tenderness" (1990), which included Sting — he worked on "with his teeth showing towards money, defying the financial limits with a viciousness."

Mr. Hanrahan compares himself to a film director in his approach. He constructs the music like a narrative, in a process that he describes as striving to "make a sequence of passions audible." He develops his ideas in the recording studio, mixing textures and voicings, in a search for new forms that seems almost metaphysical. "There's this emotion inside of you that needs to make itself heard," he said, "and you don't know exactly what it's supposed to be heard as, but you know the direction it's supposed to go."

The music reflects the struggle of its own creation: for his records he often includes not what he calls the perfect take, but the one "where the mistakes were perfect."

"On that take," he says, "the mistakes were showing what we were going for, and when we got it right, it was just reciting something that was composed before." Above all, the music must defy expectations, and he will not let anyone coast on clichés.

Recalling his work on the "Exotica" album from 1992, Mr. Bruce describes "the archetypal Kip session."

"There'd be all these really well-written transcriptions of things from the 40's," says Mr. Bruce. "Cuban arrangements, big-band arrangements, all neatly done. Then Kip would say, 'O.K., I don't want you to play anything like this.' And that was the direction. You looked at the music and didn't play anything like it.

So a lot of guys were scratching their heads, and actually coming up with some pretty interesting stuff."

Mr. Hanrahan recognizes that he is not an easy person to work with. "I'm driven by this thing to make it audible," he said. "I'm going to knock down walls to get to it, and I don't care who's standing in front of it." He has been known to scream at musicians, and once he even threw a microphone stand at someone. "You know the result you're aiming for, even if it doesn't have any definite angles, and you fight through the process to make it heard," he added.

But surviving that struggle has its rewards. "When the musician's depth and complexity matches yours, you both change the tone of the emotion you're going for, and something else comes out of it, which is even richer and more complex and darker and with more shades, and you realize this is a lifetime friend."

MR. HANRAHAN DID NOT always think he would be a musician. Though he was already playing percussion in Latin bands as a teen-ager growing up in the Bedford Park section of the Bronx, he saw himself rather as a soccer player. He had learned the sport to gain approval from his maternal grandfather, who had helped his mother raise him; he never knew his father. But Mr. Hanrahan left the Bronx, when he won a fellowship to Cooper Union in Manhattan. There he studied under the German-born Conceptual artist Hans Haacke, who introduced him to an intellectual tradition and "a method of critically thinking that was able to turn my restlessness into a forward motion."

He traveled widely — India, Haiti and Morocco — and discovered the Jazz Composers Orchestra, the avant-garde musicians' collective

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founded in the late 1960's by the pianist Carla Bley and the trumpeter Michael Mantler. Drawn by the music, he took a job in the collective's production office, where he learned about setting up a record company and independent distribution.

His American Clavé label grew out of a collaboration with the writer Ishmael Reed in the late 70's. Mr. Hanrahan was going to direct a film based on Mr. Reed's script. When the project fell through, Mr. Hanrahan turned to producing a record. The album, "Ya Yo Me Curé," was by an old friend, the trumpeter and percussionist Jerry Gonzalez. (Over the years, both Mr. Gonzalez and his brother Andy, a bassist, have frequently worked with Mr. Hanrahan.) As a result of that session, Mr. Hanrahan decided to produce his own record "Coup de Tête" (1981). He describes it as his "Alice in Wonderland," in which he tried out every idea he was unable to use on the Gonzalez session.

After recording "Desire Develops an Edge," which received rave reviews, Mr. Hanrahan formed the band Conjure, basing its music on the free-swinging poetry of Mr. Reed. The group's first album, "Conjure" (1985), featured Taj Mahal, the pianist Allen Toussaint, the bass-

ist Steve Swallow and the saxophonist David Murray. Mr. Hanrahan remains the group's musical director and occasional writer, with Bobby Womack or Jimmy Scott as the principal singer.

As a producer, Mr. Hanrahan has had his biggest success with "The Late Masterpieces," three records by the Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla, known for his daring in revolutionizing the tango and whom Mr. Hanrahan considers his "artistic father." The experience was "an intoxicating release from responsibility," he recalled. "It's great to subordinate yourself to somebody else's esthetic in which you have such an absolute loving faith, to take his esthetic further." One of the recordings, "Tango: Zero Hour" (1986), has sold 72,000 copies worldwide, nearly twice as many as any other American Clavé release.

This year, the label produced a two-CD collection, "Darn It!," by another of Mr. Hanrahan's literary mentors, the Canadian poet Paul Haines. For now, Mr. Hanrahan has turned fully back to his own music. In addition to "A Thousand Nights and a Night," he is completing an album built around live performances of his band in Europe.

Though he takes his cues from a wide field of interests, Ms. Bley appreciates the originality of Mr. Hanrahan's music and his enterprising ways. "He's just a genius at getting the right people together," she says. "Everybody wants to work for him because then they get a chance to work with someone they've always admired." Indeed, Mr. Hanrahan has been calling musicians from all over the map for what may yet grow into a three-CD opus. Every week or two he travels to New York to direct more sessions and to try out new ideas, relentless in his desire to hear what he had not imagined.